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ABSTRACT

This document sets the current literacy education movement in historical context, criticizes the actions of unprepared newcomers to field, and praises the efforts of reading professionals who use a language experience approach to teaching reading. In an overview, the faddishness of some current literacy education activity is deplored. Section 1 recounts the linkage between religion and literacy. Section 2 points out more recent history of literacy education, including the shifting criteria for what constitutes literacy, the Right to Read program, and the religious-like fervor of some literacy volunteers. Section 3 notes some definitions of literacy and estimates of illiteracy. In section 4, the shortcomings of tests and the difficulties of measuring literacy are recounted. Some suspected causes of illiteracy are considered in section 5. Section 6 examines who comes to literacy programs. Section 7 argues that higher rates of literacy will not solve U.S. productivity and other economic problems. Section 8 criticizes reading education methods that include a colonial and missionary mentality and praises methods that emphasize meaning, teach students to organize and relate information, and consider students to be "knowing subjects" instead of objects. A conclusion and recommendations section and a 67-item bibliography conclude the document. (CML)

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ADULT LITERACY: THEN AND NOW

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ADULT LITERACY: THEN AND NOW

OVERVIEW

Discussions of literacy and illiteracy have once again taken center stage in our almost cyclical attention to educational problems and practices. Researchers from closely related fields have discovered adult literacy and papers are being written and presented at conferences monthly. But adult literacy is, and has always been, much more than a passing fancy or fad for serious educators, social scientists, politicians, economists and religionists. Literacy was, and is, the quintessential instrument, technology of all societies. Its study must be embedded in a broader, more comprehensive context.

Current research is distracted by counting how many people may be classified as totally illiterate, functionally illiterate or something in between; it is attracted to whose definition is best; it is lured to conclusions from sketchy data that closely link literacy levels and economic prosperity (or its predicted lack); it rediscovers methods and instructional approaches to teaching adults which are generally benign but not terribly effective. Some of it pays minimal attention to the historical roots and meanings of literacy in any society, but not nearly enough.

I. SOME HISTORY

Writing in any of its pictographic, ideographic, alphabetic or other forms, always and everywhere represented a powerful technology which affected its users in psychosocial ways well described by

McLuhan (1963), Ong (1982), Postman (1984), Logan (1986), Whorf (1956), Sapir (1929), among others.

The invention of movable type by Gutenberg in the mid-15th century of course accelerated the development of print, which in turn acclerated the spread of writing with all of its mystical-magical resonances which critically altered the thinking and behavior of writers and readers.

Luther's Reformation of 1517 required religionists to read their own bibles. This produced a minimal and narrow literacy for many in Europe and later in the new Colonies of America. The mystical-magical religious powers of print changed direction briefly in the next century with one of the most famous political defenses of printing without censorship ever written in any language. Milton's Areopagitica in 1644: (Coffin and Witherspoon, 1946)

> For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. . . . as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God. (p. 410).

Milton cleverly and very persuasively blended the religious with the political in his argument. Later in the piece he adds: ". . . how can we more safely and with less danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason?" (429) Both religion and politics are thus protected, says he, by encouraging a free, uncensored press. Of

course, such arguments have been made since then and largely ignored by church or state, depending on who was in charge at the time and place. All language--media--permeate everything Man does. Literacy has always had its masters and its servants and the language user is both. The "Old Deluder Satan Act" of 1647 in Massachusetts colony urges the teaching of reading and writing when 50 householders live together in order to prevent them from being denied access to the Scriptures by the devil. Smith (1934, 1965) sketches the historical development of the teaching of reading and writing from the colonial period until 1965. She identifies several key periods which correspond, she says, to the major emphases in the schools and society. For example, the period from 1620 to about 1776 she calls the period of religious emphasis in which materials like the Hornbook, the Psalters, the Bible, the New England Primer, and several different spellers all emphasized religious values and beliefs and were widely used to teach reading, writing, as well as values. For many persons in this period memorizing passages of the Bible was the first step into literacy; the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments were also quite popular for this purpose-- I should say for these purposes: educational and religious.

In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass (1884) speaks of the relationship between literacy and slavery:

> It will forever unfit him to be a slave. He will immediately become unmanageable and of no value to his master. These words sank deep into my heart. From that moment I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . I set out with high hopes and fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.

The American immigrant experience of this century, especially in the first two decades, reveals how important and how effective literacy in English became for the millions who came here. For so many it opened doors to politics, education, the professions, arts--to the American dream. Many still believe that literacy and economic and political progress are linked, and to some extent I agree, but the linkages are not linear nor absolutely necessary.

In the 20th century how often have we observed, usually with great pain and suffering, the way in which dictators of the right and left have taken the schools, the press and other media--all forms of communication--under their wing and produced revisionist history, new literature, new social organization, new values, beliefs, myths, legends, etc., and how effective this control of literacy in several of its most common forms has been in domesticating and dominating untold millions of people.

It is obvious that literacy has been used to separate people from one another: the literate from the illiterate with all of the political, social, economic and religious ramifications; the rich from the poor; the powerful from the weak; the anointed from the unwashed masses. Literacy has also been used to manipulate populations and to organize the "masses" for various purposes as in the Cuban literacy campaign of the early 1960's, the Nicaraguan literacy campaign, China's massive radio, TV and press literacy activities, especially during the cultural revolution, and after the cruel and bloody crackdown on the pro-democracy Chinese students in Tiananmen Square in

June, 1989.

Literacy is minimally about being able to read and write at some predetermined level or to get along day by day in your own society; it penetrates much more deeply than that into the soul and psyche of every society and every individual. Smith (1989) "Literacy is not a set of skills or a finished state; it is an attitude toward the world."

II. MORE RECENT HISTORY

From 1840 to 1930 the Census bureau asked people if they could read or write in any language as a way to determine who was literate or illiterate, but the Census bureau did not test people nor in any other way assess who was or was not literate even by that primitive definition. This type of unmonitored self-reporting of literacy or lack of it continued into the 20th century. In World War I, 3rd grade level in school was the criterion, by the mid-thirties the level was raised to the 5th grade level and all those who have not completed that grade were considered functionally or totally illiterate. By World War II, the criterion was raised to 8th grade level, and the Adult Basic Education Act of 1966 considered adults with less than 8th grade education to be functionally illiterate. In 1969 the law was amended to include all persons with less than 12th grade education as part of the functionally illiterate population. This drastically increased the estimates of the number of persons with these problems from 24 to 69 million.

In 1969 the Right to Read program under James Allen was launched

with the widely publicized aim of eliminating functional and total illiteracy from American society in the 1970's. Many literacy programs die of their own bureaucratic weight. Like poverty itself, literacy rises to the consciousness of Americans every now and then and we spend a lot of time and money and media attention on it and, then, in keeping with our short attention spans, we lose interest in the problem and the people and the programs fade away only to return some years later in language that attempts to create the illusion that we have discovered some new issue or problem to divert our meager attention.

Literacy has been the tool, weapon of many societies, Freire (1970, 1987) and Kozol (1980, 1985) present the problems of literacy as political issues that involve disempowerment of the poor, while Venezky, Kaestle and Sum (1987) present data and their interpretations in socio-economic terms. Many others (Sticht, 1982; Mickulecky, 1982) see literacy as a specific job, vocational training program limited to preparation for the needs of particular jobs.

Laubach and many of the Literacy Volunteer groups exude a kind of semi-religious fervor in their efforts to spread literacy. Few persons or groups seem to consider literacy (at any of its levels) as much more than an accretion of specific skills necessary to read and write books in particular contexts; few seem interested in making literacy training a more comprehensive understanding of literature and language; of putting some meat on the bones of dry word recognition skills. The general impression one takes from research and from

observation of programs is that volunteers, the semi-professionals, and others who work in many of the programs, have limited expectations for the students and carry the negative biases of the dominant society about minority people, school dropouts and any who deviate from middle class norms of thought, ambition, dress and behavior.

III. DEFINITION AND INCIDENCE

We have seen that definitions of functional and total illiteracy have varied considerably over the years as the criteria have been changed.

Cross (1981) sums up rather well the current condition in the field: "Today's literature is strewn with loose terminology and mixed images..." (1965) Venezky, Kaestle and Sum (1987) offer some help:

> Literacy. . .is not simply reading, or reading plus writing, but an ability to use print for personal and social ends. It is a functional skill in that it requires the application of various skills in common, everyday situations.

Bormuth (1975): ". . . the fact is that we have not yet analyzed exactly what is meant by literacy and then devised appropriate methods for measuring it. . ." He says that literacy is "the ability to respond competently to real world reading tasks." (65) Stedman and Kaestle (1987) offer:

> By functional literacy we mean the reading and writing skills necessary to understand and use the printed material one normally encounters in work, leisure, and citizenship. We distinguish functional literacy from <u>functional competence</u> which also includes the problem-solving and mathematical skills needed to complete everyday societal tasks. (23)

Obviously, none of these definitions or general descriptions is precise insofar as indicating what kind and size of sight vocabulary

people need to have in order to be called functionally illiterate, nor which subskills in phonic and structural analysis, nor what level of comprehension and recall are required. There are, in short, no precice criteria, only vague generalizations. This only adds confusion to a field already perched uncertainly in our society.

Due to this lack of a standard definition how many people may be classified literate or illiterate is extremely chancy and unscientific. Figures range from 23 million functionally or totally illiterate adults to 60 million in Harmon and Hunt (1979) and Kozol (1985) to Terence Bells's 1982 estimate of 72 million.

Some numbers do suggest the magnitude of the problem for particular groups. For example, Kozol (1985) points out that 47% of all black 17 year olds are functionally illiterate and 1 million teenagers (12-17) cannot read above third grade level. This is a dubious statement contingent upon a test result, but we can take it as an approximation. Also, the United States is 49th among the 158 member states of the UN in literacy. Invidious comparisons with the Japanese have highlighted how badly American students compare with students elsewhere in the world in general knowledge and specifically in math and science. Ravitch and Finn (1981) have reported how poorly American students do in history and literature.

If any of the estimates is correct, or nearly so, approximately 1/3 of the adult population of the U.S. is functionally or totally illiterate. Estimates state that 16% of white adults are illiterate; 44% black and 56% Hispanic are illiterate.

We know that in American public schools (K-12) 20-25% of the students need some type of special help in learning how to read and write satisfactorily which adds 3 million more to the count.

Whatever the exact definition or exact numbers of persons of various ages who may be identified as functionally or totally illiterate the problem is enormous. Beyond these numbers we must consider how we measure performance and what the research has to say about it.

IV. TESTS AND MEASUREMENT

Stedman and Kaestle (1987) summarize most of the major problems with testing:

> Standardized tests are imperfect measures of academic performance. Their validity is limited by many factors, including the multi- choice format and the time pressures they impose on test-takers. They are constructed in such a way that small shifts in test performance produce large changes in percentile and grade equivalent rankings. (21)

And they did not include the pervasive problem of culture bias in all standardized testing. Griffith and Cervero (1977) add that the "value orientation of the test designers" (21) plays a significant role in test construction and interpretation. Stedman and Kaestle (1987): "To report an illiteracy rate, each researcher set a cutoff--the test score that separates the "functional literates" from the illiterates." Thus, choosing a higher or lower cutoff score, a researcher could arbitrarily control functional illiteracy rates. The most widely cited study is the APL (Adult Performance Level) conducted by Northcutt (1975) which identified 65 specific competencies for literacy. The APL was divided into three levels: I, II, III

representing increasing levels of competence in reading. The attempt was made to identify useful, practical daily literacy needs starting with reading signs, labels, simple directions and the like, and moving into vocational materials and newspaper and magazine reading, up to reading technical manuals and other advanced materials.

The APL suffers serious shortcomings summarized very well by Hunter and Harman (1979): ". . . the background of the APL-defining groups . . .made up largely of academicians, adult basic education administrators and teachers, and a small number of adults enrolled in basic education classes." Also, they criticize the "narrow focus of the objectives from success in economic terms and on external, functional skills . . . the excluded objectives included stimulation of imagination, sharpening and extending memory, reflecting on one's place in the world . . . expressing creativity." (18)

All of this testing and these grade level equivalents (which are not really appropriate for adults) are interesting when placed in the context of Monteith's (1980) study that found the typical magazine article to be around the 11th grade level reading level, with newspaper articles ranging from 9th to 12th grade levels and best sellers tend to be read by the 30% of the population at the lowest levels of reading ability. As to this issue, Stedman and Kaestle (1987) express my own view of this type of readability assessment: "Thus, we do not have much confidence in literacy assessments based on grade level materials." (37) Readability measures are not accurate

nor dependable since they all omit any measure of meaning and they cannot take into consideration the specific background of a reader, nor do they account for the type of material to be read.

Stedman and Kaestle (1987) conclude: ". . . that the data are sketchy and the trends are murky. Problems of definition, validity, representativeness, and comparability preclude unambiguous conclusions." (42) These measurement problems are almost identical to those researchers have uncovered for all standardized and other testing whether with suspected LD cases or for regular students at all levels.

V. CAUSES

Hunter and Harman (1979) list as key causes of illiteracy the schools, adult education program itself, the educational system and the social system. Of course, these forces are not discrete, but rather interactive. They say: "Research suggests that poverty and the power structures of society are more responsible for low levels of literacy than the reverse." (9) According to many authors the most likely candidates for various degrees of illiteracy are the poor, racial and ethnic minorities and those with less than a high school education. Clearly, there is enormous overlap of these categories so that most of the same individuals fit into two or more of these groups. Of the 60 million functional and total illiterates in the country, give or take a few million, only some 2-4 million enroll in adult education programs and the main reasons for not enrolling are: cultural and linguistic barriers, fears of failing,

distrust of mainstream institutions and culture. Again, there is considerable overlap in these reasons and the group could be reduced to two or three issues: fear of the mainstream culture and language; sense of hopelessness in making any real progress in "their" program or in "their" society. The old colonial mentality or missionary mentality as far as many of the functionally or totally illiterate adults are concerned is still operating and discourages many needy students. Hunter and Harman, (1979): "In general, ABE participants are among the 60 million "targets" who are most in tune with middle class norms. . ." (67) "ABE is a "creaming" operation that picks up those persons who are most ready." (67)

Along this line, one must consider carefully some of the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and elsewhere in the world. CLearly, Freire is concerned with the political causes and political nature of illiteracy. In his latest work, Freire (1987) says, "I always saw teaching adults to read and write as a political act, an act of knowledge, and . . . a creative act." (34) He is against most current literacy programs because they "give people access to a predetermined and pre-established discourse while silencing their own voices which should be amplified in the reinvention of the new society." (55-56) He explains his version of schools and how they alienate and systematically ignore/neglect the students' histories and cultures, and day-to-day experiences. "School values work counter to the interests of these students and tend to precipitate their expulsion from school. It is as if the system were put in place to ensure these

students pass through school and leave it as illiterates." (121) He also notes that "Language is packed with ideology. . ." (128) and that schools and many literacy programs know it and use it to the fullest extent to disempower the poor and the illiterate. He wants to see the day when literacy "becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture and linguistic practices." (157)

VI. WHO COMES TO LITERACY PROGRAMS?

Most of the estimated 2-4 million people who actually enroll in some kind of adult education program are not those in most dire need. Cross (1981) reports that "virtually all surveys, past and present, show that the more education people have, the more they will know about the available opportunities, and the more they will participate." (55) The opposite holds true as well. This agrees with Freire's notions of literacy and power. The designers of adult programs too often assume that jobs or vocational training of some kind are what poor people need and therefore want, but that overstates the case. I have administered programs for school dropouts, Mexican migrant workers, black mothers in OIC and WIN programs, Indians, VISTA, among others, and I have found some interest in practical things of course for some people, but I have also found with the right teachers and a <u>stimulating curriculum</u>, all kinds of people can become very much interested in non-practical, <u>cultural</u> and <u>academic</u> topics and issues. More on this later.

Clearly, the research does suggest that most of the people who do come to literacy programs are women who are looking for some new

skills in order to improve their job prospects. But who would seriously believe in 1989 that the majority of poor, functionally and totally illiterate people think that improving their reading and writing skills to a relatively minimal level--would get them decent paying, stable jobs? In this service economy Burger king, McDonald's and some factory jobs are paying between 5 and 8 dollars an hour and do not require a high level of reading and language skill. The best jobs require more than the minimal levels of literacy most programs offer or even promise, and this will be increasingly true in the next few years.

The GED is the top-of-the-line in many literacy programs and many of them are study-the-test-type programs which do not encourage, in any way, learning on one's own or broadening one's educational background. The GED programs, like those at lower levels, tend to have minimal expectations and rigid curricula that assure predictable, specific and limited outcomes on a particular group of subtests that have little relevance to the real world. The GED is the grudging concession of the middle class to the underclass.

Basically, who comes to literacy programs are those people who most closely emulate middle class values. Of course, there are exceptions. Some programs offer rewards (real or imagined) for attending, including money, child care, entry level jobs, etc. But the majority of non-literate persons, the so-called hard-core groups, are not being reached by most literacy programs and will not be until major changes in teacher education, curriculum and expectations change

drastically. More of the same does not work.

VII. ECONOMICS AND LITERACY

We constantly hear that there is an inevitable and causative relationship between level of literacy and income, jobs--the economy in general. Recent critics of the schools, including former Secretary of Education William Bennett, point out constantly that the deplorable state of our schools and of the high level of adult functional and total illiteracy will definitely make America less competitive economically now and in the future.

The recent study by Venezky, Kaestle and Sum (1987) promotes the conventional wisdom: "Our conclusions, echoed throughout this report, are that literacy skill levels found in the NAEP survey are not adequate, on average, for maintaining world leadership in a changing, technological society at the end of the 20th century. . ."(7) Perhaps, but we need more than skill levels "on average" knowing how fuzzy and precise a concept average is. The study continues: "Both men and women with more proficient literacy skills achieved superior employment records, avoided unemployment more frequently, and earned higher hourly wages than their counterparts with weaker literacy skills." (37) How do we know "weaker"? What kinds of jobs? Held for how long?

Yet, Weber (1975) says: "Basic education students. . . can rarely attribute a new job to their new skills . . . education does not create economic prosperity, but rather follows on it." (150) More recently Stedman and Kaestle (1987) looked at the relationship between

competence in literacy skills and job performance and reported: "The correlations between personnel's reading grade level and score on job proficiency measures . . . were quite low." (38) Sticht (1982) says, "many of the least competent in the basic skills became above average performers, while many highly skilled in the basic skills perform job tasks in a below average manner." (39) He notes that, "The methodological problems inherent in the research and the limitations of the existing data bases makes a valid, national assessment of the job literacy gap unlikely." (40) This is also true of much literacy research. Testing and questionnaires so popular with so many researchers in adult education programs and in reading as well, are not reliable nor complete enough to get the quality of information we want.

Hunter and Harman (1979): "Mass literacy does not cure the corporate ills of a society: Unemployment, poverty, discrimination, or the marginal status of certain sub-groups . . . Literacy is an accompaniment rather than a prime cause of social progress." (180)

VIII. CURRICULUM: METHODS AND MATERIALS, APPROACHES

Cross (1981) presents ideas which are becoming increasingly well accepted in the field of adult education.

> . . . the presentation of new information should be meaningful and it should include aids to help the learner organize it and relate it to previously stored information . . . it should be presented at a pace that permits mastery . . . one idea at a time and minimization of competing intellectual demands .. . Finally, frequent summarization should facilitate retention and recall. (164)

The most sensible thing about this quote is the emphasis on meaning

and on organizing and relating information. The rest of this quote, like so many others in the field, implicitly derogates and denigrates the learners. The suggestions resemble recommendations for teaching the slow-witted and retarded, rather than highly motivated, eager and experienced adults who go to adult education programs against the odds. This type of attitude smacks of educational and linguistic colonialism and missionary activity which often discourages prospective adult students from attending programs supposedly designed for them.

Smith (1989) strikes at the heart of key problems of both curriculum and methodology: "The ways in which reading and writing are frequently promoted, taught, and researched destroy the literacy we are trying to create (353-4) . . . Thinking has been taken out of reading and writing by the fragmented and decontextualized skills-based approach to teaching them." (359)

Venezky, et. al., (1987) are also realistic on this critical issue: ". . . our view is that the literacy skills students sorely lack--skills of logic, inference, and synthesis--have never been stressed in schools and yet are imperative for autonomous, effective adult life." (43) Hutchinson (1978) reported that ". . .the attendance records of students receiving specially prepared interest-oriented instructional materials were superior to the attendance records of those students not receiving such materials." (27) Who knows what else was operating in her small sample to affect the outcome, but my own direct experience with numerous adult literacy

programs clearly supports the claims for interest as a major factor in attendance, completion of program and of quality improvement in all reading and language skills. The same author, like many others, falls back on a stereotypic idea of what is appropriate content for literacy programs, she says: ". . . when the value or reward of the task is clear . . . (adults) prefer reading materials that are related to life activities. . .view job-related reading as valuable and necessary . . ." (31) As compared with what other materials and what other purposes? I find this type of study, of which there are too many, relatively useless since the authors tend to load the research dice with their questions and narrow focus. They seem to start with the premise that poor, semi-literate, underemployed adults want to get better jobs and so they want to learn to read job material only. The fact is that most job-related materials are really quite dull and uninteresting, often unrealistic and outdated. If not, the material tends to be quite limited and technical. Most adults I have taught and observed in more than 25 years all over this country, would also like to read other types of material, especially more personalized material, more human, and more inspirational, more literary.

Weber, (1975), says that the principles guiding most literacy programs ". . . rest on a shallow image of the student hardly taking into account that he or she is more than a worker who can learn to sound out words. An indication of this situation shows in the childishness and colorless content of materials designed for adults, to say nothing of the lingering use of materials designed for children in adult

courses." (151-2) She adds for emphasis: "Perhaps the most persistent weakness in literacy instructional programs is that . . . few have hardly departed in any significant way from the objectives and curricula of children's reading programs." (154)

Hunter and Harman (1979) follow up with ". . . most classes are taught in traditional elementary school teaching styles. . ." (68) and they add that, "Student achievement seems to be higher when maximum use is made of materials prepared by the students themselves or by the teachers working closely with them and lower when commerially prepared materials are used." .(69) Variations of this notion of student-prepared materials as the core of instructional programs is supported in detail by Freire (1970, 1985), Kozol (1985) and Wendell (1982) in her interesting book, Bootstrap Literature: Preliterate Societies Do It Themselves. In these bootstrap projects, so called "field linguists" were used to initiate various language activities including putting dictated stories on paper in the native language. The Mazhuas of Mexico convinced the local radio station to give time for cultural activities each week in their native language. The broadcasts were copied down from scripts and used as basic reading materials just as good language experience programs have always done. They made some books of their own language discussions and a dictionary, plus locally authored stories and a 200 page primer, which sold out immediatley. The research emphasized the need to keep literacy programs real and native. Formal writing workshops were also held. These programs included the following

activities: discussion sessions, typing classes, use of duplicator, writing time, consultants, art classes, excursions and social events. All of these were used to reinforce and to legitimize the native language for teaching and to provide the essential experiential activity to be used as the raw material for reading and writing activity. The follow-up study done by the bootstrap program reported that: "Confidence replaces timidity in some trainees, particularly among those coming from cultures which have been under the domination of another culture." (57)

Although Freire's work (1970 and 1987) considers all literacy activity to be political, revolutionary activity, his suggestions in both works sound very much like the suggestions Wendell reported for pre-literate groups. Kozol (1985) also recommends much the same type of language-experience, native language, realistic material for reading and writing. He calls them "oral histories" as the base for the language material to dictate, write and read. Like Freire, he sees the political implications of such discussions and topics, and like Freire, he feels that this type of discussion about issues such as housing, health, welfare, unemployment, discrimination, and the anger people feel about these and racial problems makes for solid instructional material. Although I do not feel the same urgency about political emphases in literacy instruction, it is clearly there. What is obvious is that using people's native language and experience to start the program is essental to improving their

self-concept. Real situations, real stories, real needs, desires, angers can be legitimate and effective starting points for literacy programs, especially for the semi- or totally illiterate groups. All of the reading and language skills are easily taught in these contexts and thus prepare students to read anything, anywhere, at any time. Specific examples can be found in Howards (1980), Lee and Allen (1963) Warner, (1963), Stauffer (1970), among others who have described in detail many ways of initiating and carrying through a complete reading/language program for non-readers of any age or or background using the language-experience approach.

Hunter and Harman (1979) recommend that:

> Starting from such immediate and practical concerns, the "curriculum" of action and learning from action would be developed. The generative themes of the community (the most significant concerns of community life) would emerge and necessary learning tasks could be identified. (118).

Freire (1987) spells out his process for developing a literacy campaign that starts with a book of photos of the immediate vicinity in which the people live and work. Then he has exercise workbooks and "cultural notebooks" dealing with the key issues facing this group of people, especially the political questions and issues they need to know about so that they may transform themselves and their world. Topics include: Studying, Work and Transformation of the World for Mastery of the World, Struggle for Liberation, New Society Productive Processes, People and Cultural, Thinking Correctly, New Man and New Women, etc. He points out quite correctly: "Students are reacting to a curriculum and other material conditions in schools that negate their histories, cultures, and day-to-day

experiences." (121) He emphasizes that education must be dialogic, and that learners are not objects but knowing subjects. Generally, approaches to adult literacy ignore the role of language as a major force in the construction of human subjectivities. That is, "they ignore the way language may either confirm or deny the life histories and experience of the people who use it." (149) (My italics)

Kozol (1985) likes the idea, of "bootstrap mobilization." (117) The centerpiece of his approach to adult literacy is ". . . oral history. . .first recorded, next transcribed and edited with selectivity that serves phonetic purposes, finally returned to the illiterate in written language that can be employed in several concrete ways." (136) This is another language-experience approach to teaching beginning reading and writing, and I commend it highly. Amoroso (1985, Feb.) experimented with what he calls "organic "primers" whcih he describes as:

> . . . a collection of teacher generated story lines, each slightly more difficult than the preceding one. . . Each story is active-based. . .content that provides critical reflection of their own experiences. . . The stories are presented in discussion format, aided by highly appealing photographs or illustrations. (399-400)

Admittedly, this approach borrows freely from much of Freire's work, (1970, 1987) and those who developed the language-experience approach to teaching reading.

TEACHERS

One of the major problems with adult education programs historically has been the lack of professional training and

supervision for many of the practitioners. As bad as lack of professional training of literacy teachers and volunteers is the practice of using some elementary or secondary school teachers to work with adults. What often happens in such situations is that the curriculum, methods, approaches to teaching and evaluation, are rooted in practices not particularly effective with children. Wharton (1978): "The lack of exposure to a variety of teaching strategies may also be due to the lack of professionalism in the ABE teaching position and the lack of specific pre-service training geared to theory and techniques to be used only with adults." (226)

Cataloging activities and methods for teaching adults is, at best, misleading since it offers the non-professional or the professional who is inexperienced teaching adults, a false sense of security and confidence about what he or she is doing. These recipes omit the essential knowledge and understanding of why the students may be grouped as they are, how they have been evaluated in terms of their reading/language ability, how to develop a coherent curriculum which should include skills as a means of getting information, rather than as the end of the process, and knowledge of developmental processes in adults, as well as something about theories of learning, among the most obvious issues.

MATERIALS

Rigg and Kazemak (1985, May) referring to the affect that readability formulas have on the content of many adult materials say that they are,

> ". . . constricted and necessarily artificial . . . the language is unlike any the adult is used to bearing or using . . . the materials require a quite proficient reader, just the opposite of the adult learners actually trying to use these texts. . ." (727)

At the other extreme the authors report what many researchers and practitioners have known for many years relative to the nature and quality of typical adult reading materials.

> Quite often one is hard pressed to distinguish the pages of these adult materials from those of workbook pages for first graders. Such commercial materials assume that reading is a process of "cracking the code" . . . these are the same kinds of materials with which many adult non-readers have been unsuccessful for years. We have to reject the commercial materials we have seen. (727)

They suggest useful criteria for choosing adult materials: ". . . meaningful, complete stories, literary merit, readily available, inexpensive and materials which will promote the integration of our students developed language skills." (728)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What can we conclude from this review of the research in adult literacy--programs, practices and problems? Clearly, we still cannot define acceptably what we really mean by terms such as functional illiterate, functionally literate, etc. As a result of this, we cannot accurately count how many people fit into any of the categories just mentioned. Also, inability to define with professional precision or accuracy, casts a shadow on much of the testing and evaluation we do in literacy programs.

What is perfectly clear to all observers--professional and lay--is that large numbers of people in this country, native speakers and non-

native speakers, cannot read or write well enough to get more information for themselves and their families: information about health, housing, employment, basic civil rights, child care, family life and key aspects of the major culture.

Innumerable literacy programs have existed over the years and many new ones have been funded and launched in the last few years--when literacy became the fad, the problem of the year, as it were. For those of us who have devoted many years to study and practice in adult literacy and closely related fields, it is distressing to hear the amateurs, the volunteers, the researchers from sociology, psychology and economics making pronouncements on the nature of literacy problems and their possible cures. Certainly, literacy and its lack is a national concern and national problem but in solving such massive and serious problems we need successful, experienced professionals to lead the way.

One of the major arguments of volunteers is that they did not cause literacy problems, professionals did; therefore, why can't they with their caring ways be of service? If volunteers really do care about the partly literate, are they willing to devote the time and energy to learn what is needed in order to be of the most value? Can they do that in 10, 12, or even 20 hours of training by another amateur? Or, do they believe, as many apparently do, that if you can read and write, you can teach others. What do they mean by reading? Mechanical mastery of some basic phonics and structural analysis principles? Recall of factual information about daily life and ordinary activities? That is level one; what about true literacy which includes ability to

read critically, analytically, and with some appreciation of literature and other good writing on a variety of subjects?

Professional training and professional support is absolutely essential to the success of literacy programs.

Many of the authors cited in this paper have recommended in one form or another, the language-experience approach (these days renamed: whole language approach). In many of my own adult education programs around the country with Indians, Mexican-American migrants, inner city blacks, Hispanics, white high school dropouts, etc., I have found the following combination to be very successful: a language-experience approach for those adults who were illiterate and for those at low levels of reading (1-3), or for those whose previous educational experiences were so negative that they needed something that appeared novel and would engage them fully and differently in participating in their own improvement.

For students reading at higher levels (4th or 5th and above), we might write a book as a class project with individuals contributing material. In Howards (1980) there are examples of some language experience activities to start the reading and writing processes embedded in a core concept curriculum. This core concept curriculum simply means that the content to be studied by the group is a concept which is looked at from many angles. For example, we did a core concept on immigration for 16 weeks with high school dropouts ages 16-21. In the study of immigration with this group of about 10 students whose reading levels were about 5th level (as determined by an informal

reading inventory we call the IDA-Individual Diagnostic Analysis), we read, wrote spoke about immigration in its historical, political, social, economic religious and cultural aspects. Everything we read, wrote and spoke about was directly related to some aspect of immigration. All of the word recognition, meanings, study, vocabulary and writing skills were taught in the context of immigration. Thus, skills were embedded in the integrated context.

This core concept curriculum works well with most adults whose school experiences, real or imagined, were negative. The curriculum of most schools, at all levels, tends to be linear, fragmented and disjointed with subjects following each other in time but not in content. What happens, in other words, is that history has nothing to do with what happens in geography or science. Reading skills are done in workbooks with no content. It is all disjunctive and largely without meaning, and therefore, without interest. There is no justification in an adult program to do the same thing again.

Thus a combination of some language-experience for lower level students or for those who need a different way to get at reading and writing that is much more personal and under their control, and a core concept, integrated curriculum has produced outstanding results. Programs that emphasize reading and writing skills--any skills--out of meaningful, useful context, will, at best, be minimally successful. We must engage adults on a level that tells them how we know they can think and understand much more than their previous educational experiences shown. We must challenge and provoke them with content and concepts

that emphasize relationships of facts and ideas, since that is where meaning resides. Programs that do not stress meaning will not succeed for most adults in the long term, even in glitzy computer game-like programs.

It is time for educators with successful experience and true desire, regain control of adult literacy programs so that they may provide incentives for the discarded adults of our society to try again to gain some control over the most powerful technology in the world: the word. It takes education and experience and a significant commitment of time and energy to achieve success; there are no quick fixes like the Laubach program or other recipied approaches to teaching people to do the kind of thinking required of truly literate persons. Games, songs, mnemonic gimmicks, good will, flash cards are simply not nearly good enough. They insult most adults who do not want to be treated as children are treated or as they were treated in their own school days. Volunteers and others with minimal training usually do not realize that the gimmicks just mentioned, which sometimes produce immediate results, are not really developing reading and language skills in depth and in significant contexts for lifelong learning. Winning some word game or filling in esoteric words in crossword puzzles or filling in blanks or playing with the latest electronic toy, the computer, are not the stuff of significant literacy that will improve the lives of the students coming to our program.

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